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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN MEDIA REACTION: MARCH 12, 2009

Summary: Reports of a "massive crackdown" on opposition parties and lawyers to thwart the long march and sit-in in Islamabad dominated headlines in all newspapers on Thursday. All newspapers front-paged Prime Minister's statement that he would "advise President Zardari to end Governor's Rule in Punjab and allow the majority party in the assembly to elect a new leader of the house." Newspapers also reported that the Army Chief Kayani expressed the "armed forces' grave concern" over the prevailing political crisis and "advised" PM Gilani "to play his constitutional role in defusing the tension." State Department Spokesman's statement that "U.S. supported freedom of speech and assembly in Pakistan" also figured prominently.

Most major dailies ran analytical editorials on the prevailing security situation in the region with special emphasis on the current political conflict in the country. The centrist national daily, "The News," noted that "it is Pakistan's tragedy that we have once more been betrayed. The forces that claimed to stand for judicial independence and democratic principle have turned brutally on people." The Jihadi Urdu daily, "Islam," observed that "if the demonstrations turn violent, there is possibility that the entire political system may be wrapped up." Whereas, the Lahore-based liberal daily, "Daily Times," cautioned that "given the growing power of the terrorists in the country, violence can be contributed even to a peaceful Long March by the terrorists through a strike that looks like the work of President Zardari." End Summary.

News Stories

"Hundreds Held In Massive Crackdown; Houses Raided Across Punjab; Main Leaders Go Into Hiding" "Dawn" (03/12)

"Police rounded up more than 400 opposition activists across Punjab, 200 of them in the provincial capital, on Tuesday night and Wednesday in a bid to thwart lawyers' long march and sit-in in Islamabad. Police also raided houses and offices of lawyers in Lahore. However, police failed to detain any top leader of Pakistan Muslim League-N, Jamaat-i-Islami and Tehrik-i-Insaf."

"Trusting Zardari Was A Mistake: Nawaz" "Dawn" (03/12)

"'Do you know what's my biggest political mistake,' a visibly bitter Nawaz Sharif asked during a telephone conversation on Wednesday morning. Then he himself went on to give the answer: 'It was my decision to trust Asif Ali Zardari.' The surprised phone call from the PML-N leader, while he was driving towards Abbotabad to address

yet another public rally, came as the Punjab police stepped up its campaign of raids and arrests in an attempt to round up opposition and right activists on the eve of the lawyers-led 'long march.'"

"PM Says He Will Advise Zardari To End Punjab Standoff" "Dawn" (03/12)

"Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani announced on Wednesday that he would advise President Asif Ali Zardari to end governor's rule in Punjab and allow the majority party in the assembly to elect a new leader of the house."

"Kayani Asks PM To Play Role As Per Constitution" "The Nation" (03/12)

"Chief of Army Staff Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani in his meeting with Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani on Wednesday expressed the armed forces' grave concern over the prevailing political crisis in the country and advised Premier Gilani to play his constitutional role in defusing the tension, which was pushing the country to major political turmoil."

"PM Ready to Take The Bull By The Horns" "The News" (03/12)

"Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani is contemplating a series of actions to address the growing political turmoil in the country, according to two separate senior official sources familiar with the developments. The Prime Minister, these sources said, was preparing for these actions following another one-on-one meeting with Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani at the PM House on Wednesday where the military and the political leadership of the country shared grave concern over the deteriorating law and order situation in wake of the call for the long march and sit-in by the lawyers, civil society and opposition politicians."

"Al Qaeda Plans To Target Long March" "Daily Times" (03/12)

"The Sindh government has been warned by intelligence agencies that terrorists could attack the lawyers' long march in Sindh, with Karachi being a prime target. There is already growing concern over Talibanization in Karachi and adjoining areas amid reports of possible Al Qaeda attacks during the long march."

"U.S. Wants Freedom Of Speech, Assembly" "The News" (03/12)

"The State Department on Wednesday said the U.S. supported freedom of speech and assembly in Pakistan and everybody should act according to the law and the Constitution without recourse to violence."

"Patterson Calls On Shujaat, Asfandiyar" "The News" (03/12)

"U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Anne W. Patterson called on PML-Q President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and ANP Chief Asfandiyar Wali in Islamabad on Wednesday separately and discussed with them the political situation. Sources said Patterson reiterated her country's stance of supporting the stability of democratic institutions in Pakistan."

"Diplomats Hope For The Best" "The News" (03/12)

"Extensive behind-the-scene diplomatic efforts are afoot to cool down political tempers in Pakistan and to sort out major irritants, which include the issue of judges' restoration."

"NWFP Minister Survives Attempt On Life; 4 Killed" "Dawn" (03/12)

"Four people were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up after he had been trapped in a house in Ghauri Khan Bajauri area, Peshawar following a failed attempt on the life of NWFP's senior Minister Bashir Ahmad Bilour, police officer Safwath Ghayur told 'Dawn.'"

"NWFP Governor Ratifies Nizam-e-Adl" "Daily Times" (03/12)

"NWFP Governor Owais Ahmed Ghani on Wednesday signed the draft of Nizam-e-Adl (Shariat) Regulation 2009, for forwarding it to the president for a final approval, official sources told 'Daily Times.'"

"12 Freed In Bajaur; 3 More Tribes Ink Peace Deal" "The Nation"
(03/12)

"After signing a 28-point agreement with three leading tribes on Wednesday, the administration of Bajaur Agency on Wednesday made free around one dozen arrested persons."

"Taliban Allowed To Operate Freely From Quetta: U.S." "Dawn"
(03/12)

"The central nervous system for the next major terrorist attack on the U.S. soil lies in Pakistan, say senior U.S. officials and lawmakers. Pakistan came under immense pressure at a U.S. Senate hearing this week, as both officials and senators accused Islamabad of allowing terrorists to use its soil for planning attacks on the United States."

"Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan Agree To Hold Regular Talks" "The News"
(03/12)

"Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran have agreed on enhancing closer cooperation between the three countries by holding regular interaction on regional issues and cooperation in all spheres including the fight against terrorism. The three leaders, who had a meeting in Tehran on the sidelines of the 10th ECO summit, agreed to have a meeting of their Foreign Ministers every month."

"NATO Supplies Going Through Iran" "Dawn" (03/12)

"A U.S. lawmaker made a startling revelation at a recent Senate hearing, claiming that some supplies to NATO forces in Afghanistan were now going through Iran. Senator Jim Webb, made this revelation at a special hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee."

"NATO Supply Truck Torched" "The News" (03/12)

"Gunmen on Tuesday torched a truck carrying supplies for NATO forces in Afghanistan and injured its driver and a helper in Soorab, 200 kilometers from Quetta, police said."

Editorials/Op-eds

"Fascism In Action," an editorial in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (03/12)

"We spiral downwards in the direction of totalitarianism, of the destruction of democratic process and institutions. Whatever good we might have glimpsed in the aftermath of last year's election has died, sacrificed on the altar of ambition and selfishness that sadly grips the minds of those who govern. It is Pakistan's tragedy that we have once more been betrayed. The forces that claimed to stand for judicial independence and democratic principle have turned brutally on people. Under its present leadership, the PPP has lost all right to be called a party of the people."

"Game Begins," an editorial in the Karachi-based, pro Taliban Jihadi Urdu daily "Islam" (cir. 15,000) (03/12)

"The leadership of the present political movement and the long march must understand that if the demonstrations turn violent, there is a possibility that the entire political system may be wrapped up, and we cannot rule out the possibility of intervention of the external forces.'

"Long March And Violence," an editorial in the Lahore-based liberal English language daily "Daily Times" (cir. 10,000) (03/12)

"The last thought is so frightening that one hesitates to put it down in writing. Given the growing power of the terrorists in the country, violence can be contributed even to a peaceful Long March by the terrorists through a strike that looks like the work of President Asif Ali Zardari. The PML-N already fears attacks on its leaders from a Karachi 'dakait' gang. The act of violence can come from a number of sources unfortunately at large for longer than the career of democracy in Pakistan."

"A Milestone," an editorial in the center-right national English daily "The Nation" (cir. 20,000) (03/12)

"It is absolutely necessary that the government implement the peace deal in letter and in spirit. Such accords have come a cropper in the past, with both sides accusing each other of violating them, and the Americans crying hoarse about the militants posing greater threat as a consequence. Islamabad would, therefore, also have to engage them to explain how crucial the deal could become in weakening the Taliban hold on the local people. The U.S. is apt to look askance at any peace move for fear that the militants only seek peace to regroup and gather strength."

"Peace Deal In Bajaur Agency," an editorial in the leading mass circulation centrist Urdu daily "Jang" (cir. 300,000) (03/12)

"It is encouraging and commendable that the NWFP government and the Mamond tribes of Bajaur Agency have inked a peace accord following peace deal in Swat. This accord will not only help peace and stability, but also promote developmental programs in the area. It is essential that both parties must stick to the peace deal, and the government should also advance this policy of peace initiatives in other tribal areas."

"Bajaur Deal After Swat: Don't Let Peace Procession Break," an editorial in liberal Urdu daily "Express" (cir. 100,000) (03/12)

"Realizing the situation, America and its allies must support, not oppose, the peace deals [in Swat and Bajaur]. In fact, the U.S. should resolve the Afghan issue through talks and then withdraw U.S. and NATO troops from there so that peace becomes a possibility in the region. Following the return of peace in the affected [tribal] areas there is a great need for development programs there. The U.S. and other developed countries must step forward in that regard so that the sense of deprivation prevalent there is dispelled."

"Taliban Leaders Pleasing Reaction Over Peace Agreement," an editorial in the Lahore-based independent Urdu daily "Din" (circ.5000)

"It is encouraging that the Taliban leaders have realized that peace cannot be bought through guns. The government has also removed their reservations and given them a chance to resolve their issues peacefully. Peace deals are a source of foiling anti-state and anti-Islam powers; their success is in everyone's interests."

"Afghanistan: The Onerous Outreach," an op-ed by I.M. Mohsin in the center-right national English daily "The Nation" (cir. 20,000) (03/12)

"The foreign forces face fearful odds particularly in South/East and they are trying to shed their arrogance of power/macho tactics etc to cultivate a soft image among the locals.... It remains to be seen if the new U.S. President can pursue his defined option in Afghanistan.... U.S. will need some honest brokers to reach a settlement with the insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan which is also suffering due to the spill-over of the prevailing mess."

"Will Politicians Fail Yet Again?," an editorial in the Peshawar-based Urdu-language daily "Mashriq" (cir. 55,000) (03/12)

"Imposition of the Governor's Rule in Punjab, the attack at the Sri Lankan Cricket team in Lahore and now the lawyers' long-march will be decisive and detrimental to the national political scenario. The political deadlock and the present instability will continue unless the judges' issues are resolved."

"Unending Series Of Trials Of Pakistani People," an editorial in the popular rightist Urdu-language daily "Ausaf" (cir. 10,000) (03/12)

"The reconciliatory mission of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Asfandiyar Wali and Nawab Aslam Raisani is failed, and sensing the gravity of the situation, both the U.S. and Britain have offered to mediate between the government and the opposition in Pakistan. Though it is too late, yet if the international forces make an effort, things can be improved even now."

"Crackdown And After," an editorial in the Lahore-based liberal English daily "The Post" (cir. 5,000) (03/12)

"It is in the interest of all political parties, including the government to keep their head cool, otherwise there are chances that the democratic edifice may crumble with the fatal loss of the fruits of February 18 elections. It is hoped that both parties will see reason and avoid the use of force to decide the issue at stake. A way can yet be found to find a peaceful solution to the current political imbroglio."

"Beginning Of The Feared Crack-Down," an editorial in the Islamabad-based rightist English daily "Pakistan Observer" (cir. 5,000) (03/12)

"There could be calls for shutter down and wheel-jam and an unending process of political instability and unrest would begin. Under these circumstances, we would urge the two sides to enter into serious negotiations and find an acceptable solution to the political and judicial impasse. Otherwise, the country and its poor people can no more afford tension and confrontation in the prevailing worst economic conditions and deteriorating law and order situation."

"Imposition Of Section 144: Both Parties Responsible," an editorial in the Lahore-based populist center-right Urdu daily "Khabrain" (cir. 50,000) (03/12)

"Democracy's survival and evolution lie in the spirit of tolerance... It was a result of government intolerance that the attitude of the lawyers and PML-N turned inflexible, and things were said that should not have been said. Similarly, it was the lawyers' and N League's intolerance that led to imposition of Section 144. Hence both sides are responsible for the current situation."

"America's New Fears," an editorial in the Karachi-based center-left independent national English daily "Dawn" (cir. 55,000) (03/12)

"Given the new fears expressed by America that many Pakistanis in the West are being trained by Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT), the importance of intelligence-gathering assumes greater importance. Rather than cracking down indiscriminately on Pakistanis fitting into a predetermined profile, the U.S. would do better to spruce up its cooperation with intelligence-gathering mechanisms in Pakistan as well as other countries in the region."
Patterson